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SUBJECT: FRANCE RESTRUCTURES RESEARCH

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¶11. Summary: To introduce "structural solutions" into France's traditional scientific system (refs A-D), Prime Minister de Villepin announced on October 5 the long-awaited Research and Innovation Bill (RIB). Advocating a new approach to funding and orienting research based on projects, the RIB will be debated in Parliament before the end of 2005. It also encourages partnerships between public research agencies and universities within the framework of poles of competitiveness. Cooperation between the public and private sector will be enhanced through the development of the "campus de recherche" (CDR, advanced research centers) system. Moreover, the French government has created a High Council for Science and Technology (HCST) to advise on research priorities. End summary.

Painful (and Slow) Delivery.

¶12. After 18 months of discussions and postponed decisions, the GOF released on October 5 the draft of the new Research and Innovation Bill (RIB) promised by President Chirac in early ¶2004. The new legislation should be approved by the Council of Ministers in mid-November and discussed in Parliament before the end of 2005 for a final vote in early 2006. A number of measures and structures described in the Bill have already been rolled out, e.g. the National Research Agency (NRA, ref F). The proposed legislation, heralded by de Villepin as a "real pact for research" addresses two acknowledged weaknesses of France's research system: insufficient technology transfer to the industrial sector, and the opacity of a research system made up of many public research agencies, grandes écoles, and universities.

Universities to gain under the proposed legislation

¶13. According to a recently released study by the French GAO (Cour des Comptes), the organization, decision processes and management tools in the higher education sector are "far from being adapted to their role and responsibilities in the research sector." University "poles" are too small to be visible at the international level and to attract the best teachers-researchers and students. According to a recent evaluation of universities internationally, the first French university ranks 46th and only four universities in France are ranked among the first one hundred worldwide. To these "organizational problems," the RIB seeks to bring "structural solutions."

Five objectives - and as many structures

¶14. The new RIB claims five main objectives:

-- Reinforcing France's strategic orientation capacities: Under the direct supervision of the President, the HCST will be responsible for making recommendations on France's research priorities. After the establishment of the NRA in 2005, the arrival of this new structure confirms the leading role the state intends to play in "steering research."

-- Implementation of a "more universal, homogeneous and transparent" evaluation system: A new National Evaluation Agency will replace existing and scattered evaluation committees and evaluate all public research operators, including the NRA.

-- Increasing the international competitiveness of research labs: Several measures have been taken to simplify the complex administration of public agencies. Cooperation between various public research actors will be favored by the creation of Research and Higher Education Poles (RHEP) and the development of "more visible" CDRs (see para 5).

-- Restoring the prestige of scientific jobs/attracting junior researchers (ref E): besides the 3000 new permanent research positions to be created in 2006, the GOF plans a 16 percent

increase of PHD/postdoc research grants over the next two years. Incentives to encourage the industrial sector to hire young researchers will also be significantly increased. New grants, known as 'Descartes grants,' representing a 60 percent increase of basic salary, will be allocated to a number of researchers every year for a five-year period to encourage individual initiatives. Mandatory teaching hours for young teachers-researchers at university level will be reduced to provide more time for research.

-- Reinforcing public/private partnerships: State aid, including new fiscal mechanisms, will encourage cross-fertilization between public and private research notably in the framework of newly designated "competitiveness clusters." (Note: Sixty-seven such clusters were selected in mid-2005 following a GOF's invitation to tender project proposals.)

Poles and Centers

15. The 'Research and Higher Education Poles' (RHEP) are designed to provide universities and public research establishments an opportunity to gather around common research themes at a regional level. 'Campuses de (of) Research' (CDR's) will be granted status as foundations. Their goal is to facilitate the gathering of experts on a specific research theme. After the release of the 2006 research budget (ref E), the GOF has decided to earmark an additional 300 million euros to speed up the launch of these two types of entities. Between five and ten CDR's are reportedly in the pipes, among them Strasbourg (medical research), Grenoble (nanotech), and Saclay (Paris area, neurosciences). In certain cases, these centers - devoted to basic research - will be associated with competitiveness clusters.

Funding: The Post-2007 Worrisome Variable

16. The RIB confirms the GOF's commitment to increase the research budget by an additional one billion euros per annum during the period 2005-2007. If the bill is passed, the GOF will also commit to increase the public effort in favor of research to 24 billion by 2010 (a 27 percent increase over 2004). However, by law, the allocation of additional means after 2007 (the end of the current legislative term) will depend both on the then economic situation and priorities of the (post-2007) successor government and on the results of a progress report at the end of 2007.

Can't Please Everyone.

17. A number of researchers have found the RIB a "huge disappointment," desiring a more visible and longer commitment to research. There are also those who continue to fear the transformation of the main public research establishments such as the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) into agencies of means responsible for "providing funding, evaluation, but with little management power." Researchers' unions demand the dissolution of the NRA, accusing it of using funds meant for basic research at public research agencies. Others acknowledge the positive - jobs, money, better evaluation procedures, measures in favor of young researchers - but also note that efforts to increase research grants (plus 16 percent over the next two years) and salaries remain insufficient to make scientific careers attractive compared with those in, for example, the U.S. Some see the success of the new bill as a function of the ability of the various new structures - the HCSP, NRA, ERA, CDR, RHEP, competitiveness clusters, and the Agency for Industrial Innovation - to interact. It is unclear whether these new entities will replace, absorb, or coexist with current structures. Relative to the research sector, universities appear more satisfied with the bill which will provide them with more autonomy to conduct research.

18. Comment: The French have long realized they needed to take major steps to energize the traditional civil service-oriented research system. While the "pact" announced by de Villepin provides for significant changes, they are far from revolutionary. For example, even though the new legislation enhances the role of the private sector in research, it does not materially degrade the primacy of the public research establishment. Of note is the extent to which the U.S. scientific system has been held up in France as the model for change. The new National Research Agency (Agence Nationale de la Recherche) aspires to embody NSF characteristics. End Comment.

STAPLETON